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SUBJECT: CIUDAD GUAYANA SUMMIT: QUADRIPARTITE LOVE FEST

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Summary

1. (C) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez hosted the Presidents of Brazil, Colombia, and Spain March 29 in a summit concerning national security, poverty reduction, democracy, and regional integration. Chavez interspersed his remarks at the follow-on press conference with some anti-US invective. Spanish President Jose Luis Zapatero met the following day with legislators from the Venezuelan opposition who expressed the threat Chavez posed to democracy; Zapatero also underscored the need for democracy and human rights in his March 30 speech to the National Assembly. Having received the international publicity and legitimization he covets, Chavez probably will use the meeting to try to debunk claims of his authoritarianism. End summary.

Defense

2. (U) Terrorism dominated the discussion of defense-related issues in a summit of Brazilian, Colombian, and Spanish Presidents hosted by President Hugo Chavez March 29 in the southeastern Venezuelan city of Ciudad Guayana. The statement issued by the summit condemned terrorism "in all of its forms and manifestations, whatever its origin or motivation." Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva exploited the occasion to deny his political party had received FARC backing and assured the group he would not accept insinuations that Chavez had FARC ties. In a reference to Washington, Chavez said a "boogiemán" moved through Latin America inventing charges that he armed Colombian guerrillas. In an attempt to preempt future charges, Chavez predicted that despite his innocence, "things" appearing to implicate him "would keep happening." Not realizing he was on the air, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe described GOC attempts to negotiate with the ELN. When Chavez warned Uribe that the press was transmitting his remarks, Uribe joked that he had a "little secret with 26 million people."

3. (U) The presidents took advantage of the venue to justify Venezuelan arms purchases. Chavez and Spanish President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero announced Venezuela had negotiated with Spain what the press called the largest contract ever secured by the Spanish military industry in the sale of 12 transport aircraft, two corvettes, and two smaller patrol boats. Zapatero pitched the sale as an effort to help Venezuela control its border regions, fight drug trafficking, and respond to natural disasters. Chavez contrasted the peaceful uses of the materiel with the lethality of the F-16 fighters Venezuela had bought from the United States. Although Colombian President Alvaro Uribe only referred to the deal in passing, the Venezuelan press interpreted his presence and comments as having supported the purchase.

Social Issues

4. (U) The themes of poverty reduction and democracy were additional highlights of the summit, according to press reports. The leaders agreed to coordinate efforts to overcome poverty, and they offered some undefined proposals. Zapatero suggested a debt for education exchange program, on which he did not elaborate. For his part, Chavez proposed the creation of an international humanitarian fund. Turning to political freedoms, the leaders registered their support for democracy as a key factor in institutional development, pluralism, and social cohesion. Chavez spun off from the joint statement to challenge listeners during the press conference to find examples of GOV human rights violations or press censorship.

Integration

15. (C) The leaders praised regional and global integration efforts. They singled out the organizations MERCOSUR and the Andean Community of Nations and hailed the role Zapatero played to seek agreements among both groups and the European Union. The chiefs of state also backed the creation of a South American Community of Nations and Petroamerica, an initiative to unite state-owned energy companies throughout the hemisphere. Finally, the presidents agreed to strengthen a multilateral order based on the sovereignty of all nations.

Opposition Gripe Session with Zapatero

16. (C) Members of the National Assembly from the Venezuelan opposition presented Zapatero with "proof" that Chavez threatened Venezuelan democracy during a meeting March 30. Representing the new Polo Democratico grouping of small parties, Deputy Rafael Simon Jimenez raised with Zapatero such themes as press freedoms, persecution of the opposition, and abuses of the Venezuelan judicial branch. Deputy Felipe Mujica (Movement to Socialism) warned Zapatero not to confuse Chavez's radicalism with the moderate left-wing parties. Polo Democratico member Deputy Carlos Casanova returned from the meeting to tell poloff he expected Venezuela's relations with Spain would remain strong. He added, however, that he was "absolutely certain" there would be another bilateral incident between Caracas and Bogota because Chavez would look for a way to justify his sympathy with Colombian armed groups. Accion Democratica (AD) did not join the meeting, reportedly because party leaders felt that AD's historic ties with Zapatero's Socialist Worker's Party and the Socialist International warranted a separate session.

Comment

17. (C) Despite the summit's lack of detailed proposals, Chavez got exactly what he wanted: a forum in which he is taken seriously at the global level. Fond of reminiscing about his hobnobbing with world leaders, Chavez is likely to continue to point to the legitimization he received in this encounter to contradict charges that he threatens democracy at home. In particular, he may rub in having received both a blessing for his arms purchases and the implied recognition from Brazil, Spain, and Colombia that he is a worthy partner in the fight against terrorism.

18. (C) Deputy Casanova's warnings of another bilateral dispute are not without merit. Indeed, two ELN personnel died in a standoff with the FARC on March 28, and Venezuelan soldiers roughed up Colombian citizens after crossing the border March 21 to investigate gasoline smuggling, according to press reports. Chavez, who has not yet clarified whom he means by terrorists, will probably continue to propagate myths to wiggle out of his responsibility to fight Colombian guerrillas. (The Venezuelan Ministry of Defense has rejected claims that troops violated the Colombian border, and Vice President Rangel has denied that terrorists were active in Venezuela.)

19. (C) That said, we believe that the summit's anti-terrorist rhetoric and promises offer Colombia an opportunity to follow up with Spain and Brazil as the GOV fails to follow through.
Brownfield